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AUTHOR Reichart, Sandford
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ABSTRACT

The author considers the state of the art in gifted education. Initial sections present opinions of a panel of 150 professionals regarding state administered programs, state discretionary programs, professional development proposals, the nature of learning, exploitation of children, program documentation, and model project proposals. Six issues are reviewed, including the lack of leadership resources and the diversion of available money into packaged systems. Listed among policy implications are the need for federal policy to guarantee the rights of children and parents and rigorous credentialing for any person involved in staff development in the field of gifted and talented. (SB)

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Education Change Management Series Publication #5

"GIFTED EDUCATION: ISSUES AND NEEDS WITH IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY DEVELOPMENT"

by Dr. Sandford Reichart

Presented to the
National Policy Institute
Institute for Educational Leadership
on Gifted Education
George Washington University
Washington, D. C.
25 June 1980

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FOREWORD

Education Design Center is pleased to include in the **Education Change Management Series** this publication of Dr. Sandford Reichart's state of the art presentation on the topic of gifted education. Few individuals are as well qualified for the task of signaling out for policy makers and educational leaders the implications and challenges of today's renaissance support for the education of gifted youngsters.

A forceful advocate of gifted education programs, Dr. Reichart points out equally forcefully the extent and nature of current practices, programmatic issues and research needs which require priority attention to strengthen and validate the field. Without this rigor and discipline, he warns, the field is in danger of being reduced to the offering of duplicative, politically-motivated programs packaged as quick-fix attempts to respond to an educational need with more attention to program management than to purpose and appropriate schooling practices. As an example he refers to the confusion of the need for appropriate means of identifying gifted minority and disadvantaged students to avoid confusion with the needs of desegregation efforts.

Dr. Reichart brings his own rich, unique educational experience as a gifted child, an experience which itself has much to say about our approaches to the education of exceptional learners. Dr. Reichart has brought his artistry as a gifted educator to a career as classroom teacher, administrator and university professor.

Professor and director of special education leadership development programs at Case Western Reserve University, Dr. Reichart is a founder and vice-president of **Education Design Center.** He serves as a consultant to the Office of Gifted and Talented in the Department of Education and in that capacity was the only panelist to participate in the review of all 250 competitive grant funding proposals submitted to the Office of Gifted and Talented for 1980-81 funding. Based primarily on that experience, Dr. Reichart offers an objective distillation of current practices and priorities in the field of gifted education. This assessment was originally presented in slightly different form to the gifted education institute for Educational Leadership sponsored by the National Policy Institute at George Washington University in June 1980.

The **Education Change Management Series** is devoted to the exploration of schooling and the management of educational change in the 1980's. Certainly Dr. Reichart's comments provide a framework for establishing the priorities to consolidate and strengthen a critical aspect of U.S. education.

Kenneth W. Thomas, Editor

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First I need to say that I am an advocate of gifted education. I believe in the advocacy of education for all young people in the context of their individual needs, their problems, – their exceptionality. Yet, every once in a while, the comments I have prepared may appear not to be advocacies. They are offered in the interest of precision directed toward definitions for some focus, and hopefully toward some advancement of our common forum, our common dialogue.

I've gone back to some faded teacher's notes from 1958 when I was teaching at the Horace Mann Lincoln Institute. A group of "disadvantaged" (although this was before the disadvantaged were given that label) young people from Harlem were working with us. We were working through such things as the study of Renaissance literature, art, and the study of Existential literature and philosophy. One group decided to do a ballet. They entitled it, "The Gifted: Fate, Future or Fiction". One child, who chose not to dance, decided that she would write the only spoken words. I would like to share these with you.

Needs ever present, sometimes met,
live with us throughout the ages.
Gifted, an existent reality, frequent neglect.
Gifted, new stirrings, stretching, waiting,
die among us wanting the visions of/for
Actions, ever exacting,
Actions, awkwardly faced.
Responses, not rhetoric,
Responses, not language live in life,
not in fantasy.
Gifted, a forward discipline.
Gifted, denouncing indulgence,
Gifted, new stirrings, hoping, waiting,
do not die among us wanting the vision
of the vision for.

I don't think I could bring more eloquence to the present state of the field than those comments written in 1958 by this child.

Holding these words in momentary abeyance, may I quickly give you an overview of the process from which the synthesis I am presenting to you was prepared. Beginning February 11, and going through to March 25, 1980, approximately 250 proposals were received from the professional field by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Gifted and Talented. These were in response to requests for proposals in the various areas regulated by the Federal Legislation. Approximately 150 professionals participated in peer panel review of these proposals. The proposals were read diligently in arduous and rigorous fashion. The impressions of the nearly 150 professionals involved were synthesized into four clusters of general influences and reported back to the respective panels. Dr. Lyon, Director of the Office of Gifted and Talented, requested that I lead a seminar at the end of each panel at which time these comments were offered, distilled, absorbed and modified. I feel comfortable therefore, that these comments today reflect the consensus of those professional's views.

STATE ADMINISTERED PROGRAMS

The state of the field as perceived through the proposals by the colleagues led to one pervasive concern regarding the State Administered Proposals in general. Even while recognizing that the monies available were indeed few and not anywhere near what the budget for them will one day be, the major concern was that some state directors and some state systems themselves were often not demonstrating the kind of overt leadership, the kind of dynamic power, that in terms of mobility and flexibility could generate excitement in going from state level intentions down to the grass roots of the local school. It was felt by many panel analysts that the proposals had a perfunctory tone in that the federal guidelines said "Here are the monies" and certain persons chose to say merely, "Give them to us", rather than demonstrating any kind of rigor in the intentions within the proposals themselves. That is not altogether surprising considering that the process was indeed a new one. I think it appropriate, however, to remind you, as indeed Dr. Lyon has, that the entity known as leadership is wanting. If indeed it is wanting, it is at the same time being forced to stretch because everybody is out there seeking to fulfill their own needs. And so, within the parameters of quality, there are some urgent and unattended needs which the proposal writers might chose to address.

STATE DISCRETIONARY PROGRAMS

The panel on State Discretionary Programs felt that when it came to state level activity, the discretionary program requests tended to be already available through State Administered Grants. Concerns were frequently expressed by panelists: "Why are we seeing so much duplication?" "Why are we not seeing more that seems to be focused, more that has some specificity of direction?"

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT PROPOSALS

These concerns were exacerbated by the panelists who read the Professional Development Proposals between March 10th and 13th. In synthesizing the recurrent concerns, among the most pervasive modes of expression were: "Where is the impact?" "How will we ever realize impact?" "The money is limited, yes, but, why is it being so fragmented? Why is it being so scattered?" "Is there no sense of where to put money toward the greatest impact?" There were also questions of ethical concern and pressing concerns regarding the disadvantaged about which we will speak later.

Although I have left public schools, I feel that I have never really left being a classroom teacher. And, although now centered in the higher education community, having been associated with it for nearly 28 years in the field of the gifted, I felt embarrassed that the recurrent hue and cry was, "Where is the leadership in the higher education community?" I was ashamed by the higher education community's inservice proposals that were so insufficient they would accomplish nothing. No outcomes. No precision. No depth. Because indeed it appeared that the proposals were submitted merely because it was something perfectly proper to do. Those of you who know the work of James Branch Cabell may remember that in *Jurgen*, as the solution to every crisis, it is stated "and he did the perfectly proper thing". These are times wherein the perfectly proper thing may not indeed be done when the emphasis is often an expediency; and the panelists saw that. Programs would have been supported for new PH.D.'s for leadership, new Master's Degree programs. Yet, the majority of proposals submitted were for non-degree and, more likely, rather expedient inservice projects. Again, the professional approaches that emerged over and over in these proposals had not been tested, had not been validated.

THE NATURE OF LEARNING

The way that I try to come at the field of gifted education is through the context of the nature of learning, the context which is the nature of exceptionality. Indeed we are, each of us, exceptional persons with strengths, with weaknesses. Where there is that element called "giftedness" and "talent", it is an aspect of exceptionality. From the standpoint of the field of special educational services, we have long been committed, to this child in front of us, this special child. That child may be physically handicapped, retarded, or may be gifted. Therefore, it is regrettable that so much time is spent on confusions related to terminology rather than commitment to intervention.

Indeed the determination of cause of the exceptionality and the best interventions required have always been the obligations that we and others have assumed in a multi-disciplinary process. We are responsible frequently for the survival and for the well-being of persons who need our nurturance and our skills. At the end of a treatment period we need to be able to designate where the individual is as a person, as a human being. Hence, the testing of hypotheses, hence the testing of every possible kind of intervention. We need scientific basis for practice, yet, over and over, panelists were saying, "Where has the test of this particular approach been tried?"

Again and again, in the discretionary proposals and in the professional development proposals, it was demonstrated to the panelists that evidence for programmatic approaches was not being presented. Programmatic precision, dignity, elegance are part of the legacy of special education. Their absence may be as much an ethical issue as anything else. Too frequently we are finding concern for them in gifted education missing.

EXPLOITATION OF CHILDREN

Frequently, in absence of that kind of commitment we have exploitation. So often in the proposals, **children** were missing. In my own experience with staff development projects involving many teachers, administrators and students, people seem to prefer to have we consultants jump around and do little road shows: "Show us what to do with this one". "Show us what to do with that one". Unfortunately, when I pop in and do jumps through hoops and all, nothing permanent happens as a result. Nothing permanent happens because we each must do it as we will, out of our own being. I may have peripheral vision and use it. You may not have peripheral vision but have a memory for names and you use that. Our talents are individual and we use what we have – we must or we have no reality – only mimicry. When you look at such systemic issues, people frequently do not want to deal with them. That is when my partner, Kenneth W. Thomas, the planner, will say, "Oh, did anyone talk about a child today?" "Yes, there really is a child out there." Too many people do not appear to want to deal with content but want instead a quick fix. And in that way children were missing from many of the proposals in this cycle. The proposals dealt with management of money available as opposed to the needs of individual children. You, like the children, are life and flesh and blood. You are not just statistics on a page leading toward a grant. And after you get done with the children being able to run and jump and play, and perform and on and on, you still must ask: "Where is the discipline out of which children have acquired equity in mind and being and soul and heart – equity that may be valued in the market place." You must ask, "Will the needs of the children to be educated in unique ways be understood by the people whose dollars are required, or will lack of understanding let those dollars go to some other programs?"

PROGRAM DOCUMENTATION

You have to remember the long road we have traveled in the field of the gifted and in many ways and situations we're back again to square one. Evaluation: A string of questions follow . . . Where? When? How? What? Where do people choose to evaluate? How are they going to evaluate? What are they going to evaluate? On what basis will they evaluate? Where will they disseminate and how? Through what replication systems? Again and again panel members, some of them leaders in the field as state directors, would say, "We have recipes from these programs. We do not have substance nor specifics." Unfortunately, recipes are not always appropriate in terms of rigor and precision. We frequently have the need for some kind of semblance of rigorous scholarship. You would not come to me, I hope, and pay one penny for a graduate course, much less a thousand dollars or two thousand dollars unless I could document whatever I am privileged to try to share with you. You must demand the documentation. In a field dealing with human beings, be it gifted, be it crippled, be it disabled or whatever, we need to document our scholarship. We do not have the privilege to be cavalier in our actions. We must operate on the basis of knowing more than we do not know, and still have the doorways open for exploration, to go forward, to learn, to unlearn, to relearn and to put it back to the test of time and rigor again and again.

Over and over panel colleagues said, "We have no research evidence to support the approaches being proposed. We do not have realistic identification systems even though they are federally mandated." Later we will deal with that issue and with the need for curricular and instructional systems which are virtually absent. There is need for a response that is powerful – a response that says we will look at what makes the difference; we will look at everything in research controlled ways. The point is that we actually know certain things but, as I've said before, the way I may do something is not the way you may do it, except in principle of practice. It must be done in terms of individual personality and this is what is wanting. There is need for the excitement of the human person to emerge in the field. There is need to say we know something about the nature of learning which will make a difference.

MODEL PROJECT PROPOSALS

The panel which reviewed Model Project Proposals probably had the most difficult task of all the panels. The panel's follow-up seminar lasted almost two hours. Again and again the panelists said: "The proposals are poorly written, they are poorly developed, they have limited evaluation systems". "They are indeed management proposals rather than educational ones". Over and over again they asked: "Where is the nature of excellence?" Where indeed? And how are the federal mandates being followed? Yes, the Office of Gifted and Talented can prepare the guidelines, interpret and facilitate, but a field must respond in terms of compliance.

Out of the synthesis capsuled above, we prepared a list of central issues as a state of the field that lead to a major need for commitment.

SIX BASIC ISSUES

There are six basic issues which emerge. Unfortunately they are best expressed negatively. These state where the field is, where you are, where we are together, and where we must move. Of course, where we must move is beyond mere awareness, which is ever a transitory state, beyond maintainence, and even beyond nurturance into the activation of a system called the education of the gifted and talented. What are the six basic areas?

First, there is an absence of validated effort to demonstrate the effectiveness of current approaches and practices to gifted education. Many, many which are being promolgated appear as random explorations, as expediencies. They often appear to merely respond to available funding. Why do you need to know that? Because as leaders, we must have rigor now or we won't impose it later as the appropriations increase, which we certainly hope they will. And if indeed there is opportunism now, consider what will happen when more monies are available. Validated research is not esoteric. I am not speaking about something that is epitomized by someone coming in this room and someone going out that door and a team deciding what significance took place in the middle. There are numerous kinds of experimental designs, numerous kinds of analytical systems of investigation that look with precision at human events involving people. That is needed. In many, many minds it is the priority.

Second, there appears to be a lack of leadership resources for developing a commitment to disciplined, rigorous definitions of "gifted". This, in spite of the many sincere professionals and work presently being done. There must be rigourous policy directions based upon proven theoretical systems. In 1980 we do not need to rediscover the wheel. We have magnificent, eloquent, theoretical systems regarding the nature of human development and personality, human motivation, human learning. We need to look at that research and we need to be certain that what we are seeing in federal proposals reflects validated educational practices.

Third, there is concern over likely exploitation of children in the name of federal support. Often programs appeared more political than educational. Often they appeared to be for grabbing money. As a person who has tried to serve parents through 28 years of education in many roles, I need you to know that parents, in my experience, do not want money to be grabbed. They want money to be used well. And I think the professional world needs to respond to the difference between taking money and using it well.

SIX BASIC ISSUES (continued)

Fourth, available money is frequently diverted into packaged systems. In my less charming moments I call this "the entrepreneureship route" or "the traveling road show route". If I've said what I am saying to you before, you don't need me. If what I'm trying to say to you is not designed for you as of this moment, as of this experience, you do not need me. If what we are doing here is going to be packaged and delivered to every other group and we add a little video here and a little this and a little that and in effect say, "Here is gifted education", we end up with things, not substance – not greatness. We do not end up with facts and reality. There is too much of this packaging of things for a field that needs instead the support of theoretical systems if it is ever to gain respect and additional needed fiscal support.

You know, I go back to when the field was using the Terman work. I have seen, regrettably, what happened to the characteristics of the gifted. And I have also seen when those characteristics began to be altered. You probably remember there was a time when the gifted characteristics included the view that people had to be taller if they were gifted, people had to be stronger if they were gifted, and so forth. It began to look a great deal like a test for Aryan supremacy. We tend to forget what happens to all the cycles when they are revisted. And nothing is as repulsive. You don't have to believe that, but I do, obviously. One begins to feel that nothing is as repugnant as old packaging thrown at people, with some new lingo, without having been tested – an updated revision brought forth as a new thrust. And you can experience production after production like that.

Fifth, the meaning of gifted is diffused behind a cloud of possibilities. We need to look at what today is valid for today. And that doesn't mean that everybody – every little child, bless his or her little soul, who gets out there and dances is talented or gifted. When I performed as a pianist, my talent needed to be put to skilled development, rigorously developed with hard, hard work. On that continuum of concert stage talent there were people at the very bottom and people all the way up at the very top – still all musically gifted. Some of the people that I grew up with were relatively average people intellectually, but very gifted musically. Regardless of whether there is talent or giftedness or both in combination, identification and intervention must require discipline in methodolgies and outcomes expected. One of the things that we need to know is that everybody doesn't get in on the act as gifted – and certainly not gifted in all areas. If so, let's just throw in the book of Corinthians and say, we all have gifts, some of tongues, some of prophecy, some of teaching, some of this, some of that. Gifted by educational standards must mean more than that. We need a field that can define giftedness with rigor and precision. We must get past the emphasis upon management concerns and go to educational principles. We must not allow new networks to be created that violate the best that is educational. We all can propagandise. We should. We should all go out and kiss and love a talented, gifted child today. Two, or three or five. **But,**we need to know why we're doing this. We ought to do it to make a **difference in education.** We have a disturbing lack of any basic nomenclature. We have a disturbing lack of any sense of what we mean by concepts of behavior and of professional literature in the systems of behavior. We are now in a void in terms of any kind of systematic effort toward evaluation.

Sixth and last, the most appalling thing is that although there is supposedly a moral, ethical commitment to the minority disadvantaged, proposal after proposal came in as though this population did not exist. When we say, he may not be able to take this particular test but, and, if, we are patronizing and when any one is patronizing, they are not identifying. We have not made the moral commitment that culturally and intellectualy we must appropriately adjust our criteria in terms of the understanding of others, from which – and only from which – may be derived a sense of their uniqueness. The field has been appallingly negligent in simply saying, "Oh well, there is just no way to do it". The assurance block on the proposal is checked, but with no indication of with what or how to begin to meet the challenge.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

As an involved, caring, committed educator who has studied, worked through and been a part of the process – I will now share my conclusions about what I would do – or would not do – if I were at the helm of gifted education today. The result is ten policy implications without which no funding would be released:

1. I would not look at a single request for money for the gifted and talented unless I saw complete, absolute compliance with the federal guidelines.

2. I would not look at any proposals that misused the process of desegregation and confused it with the process of identification of minority, disadvantaged, gifted. I would not look at any proposals that did not demonstrate the willingness to get out there and work with children to see who and what they are. The need in the field is people who are working hands on with children, who are seeing who and what children are, not sitting in an office. I wouldn't fund anything unless that came through.

3. I would not look at any proposal that did not have a sequencing of assessment data, identification data and practice, programmatic practice validated by research findings or research assumptions.

4. I would insist on an awareness of the fact that the field of gifted and talented is most suitably placed in the context of **quality of education** and should be considered as part of the total context of **schooling.** We are not talking about something

POLICY IMPLICATIONS (continued)

up there on Mt. Olympus. We are talking about the schooling needs of children, some of whom are gifted and talented, others of whom some are retarded, and individual or exceptional, in other ways.

5. I would want and seek a federal policy to guarantee the rights of children and parents, and that includes the rights of gifted and talented children, and the rights of the parents of gifted and talented children. The violation of parental rights is obscene: a parent, should have the choice of acceleration, of this, of that, or of whatever method of intervention. It is a parent's right. It is a child's right. Children need to have a decision making process built into programming and the opportunity to make choices.

   And in the process I would establish in gifted education a policy placing it as mandatory that the Individualized Education Program now present in Public Law 94-142 be present in the education of a gifted youngster. Children need to be diagnosed for who and what they are, given the specific educational experiences needed, with outcomes for which both the classroom and the school are accountable. Without such diagnosis we'll end up with an eternally uncharted array of unforecast little snowflakes and unpredictable little starbursts. We'll never have a field.

6. I would have rigorous credentialing for any person involved in staff development in the field of gifted and talented. I would want to be sure that they knew what they were doing. And that is a very significant issue.

7. I would give priority to proposals that are beyond awareness, beyond maintenance. I would give top consideration to proposals that have built-in components for rigorous investigation. You rarely hear the language, "We are going to investigate – we are going to examine." Instead, again and again, you hear, "Let's make them more aware". "Let's maintain more of what we have".

8. I would reduce the current emphasis on short term intervention. I would look at every proposal in terms of whether or not it is an expediency alone.

9. I would insist that efforts toward the education of the gifted and talented be placed in the context of long range planning wherein there are laid out specific objectives, specific monitoring and feedback mechanisms for program evaluation and revision.

10. I would insist that these programs become institutionalized, self-sustaining and self-perpetuating.

Let me conclude with the words of another child – a sightless, gifted child – an eleven year old boy – which, I think, say as eloquently as possible the urgency of the challenge before all advocates of gifted education to examine our present state and to demand of ourselves the social and educational policy changes which emerge.

> To be gifted in my lifetime means no more than what I may be able to do for another. I may dance, from which may be derived pleasure. I may sing and the troubador's song may echo again. Yet, there will be no point to my life now nor ever unless some difference is made on behalf of another. I ask for help. Help. Not that I am blind, but help for my mind that wants to become free. Help in order to be able to help.